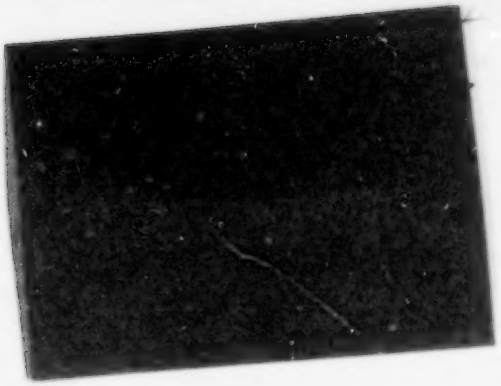

THE SECRETARIAT—
Twenty-Five Years After

United Nations

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All anniversaries are occasions for looking forward as well as backward. The twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations is a singularly appropriate moment for a reappraisal of this great modern institution as a whole and for a searching and constructively critical look at the working of its principal organs—the General Assembly, the three great Councils, the International Court and finally—for it must never be forgotten that this too is a principal organ as defined in Article 7 of the Charter—the Secretariat. During the next few months much will be written and more will be said about the achievements and the shortcomings of the legislative bodies in the first quarter century of the world Organization's history but it will probably be left mainly to the Fifth Committee to discuss certain aspects of the working of the Secretariat and then largely in the context of its annual debate on the budget. It is hoped that this article may contribute to the fruitfulness of that and any wider discussion of the future of the Secretariat which the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary may engender.

Those responsible for establishing the United Nations Secretariat in 1945—both the legislators in the first Assembly in San Francisco and the early administrators at Lake Success—had the good fortune and the wisdom to draw heavily on the experience of the League of Nations. It was not, therefore, merely brave untested aspiration that led to the fiat that:

> "The paramount consideration in the employment of the staff and in the determination of the conditions of service shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity. Due regard shall be paid to the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible."

These were the considerations which had also moved Sir Eric Drummond, its first Secretary-General, and the other keel-layers of the League more than two decades earlier.

Qualities Required in the Secretariat—the Importance of an International Outlook

It was fortunate, too, that despite the overriding preoccupations of the Second World War, men who had served the League and that other great pioneer of international co-operation, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), found time to give thought to the problems inherent in staffing the secretariat of the future world Organization. In a valuable little monograph which first appeared in the *Public Administration Review* in the spring of 1943, C. W. Jenks, now Director-General of the ILO and at that time its legal adviser, exposed some of the problems likely to beset the staffing and functioning of the International Civil Service of the post-war era. Starting from the premise, still rightly and universally accepted, that final responsibility for policy must necessarily rest with the representative bodies, he suggested that a degree of leadership or initiative in suggesting lines of policy should come from the chief executive and his senior colleagues in the Secretariat. The quality of this leadership would in turn depend upon the qualities of the staffs below the highest levels. These, Jenks listed as "integrity, conviction, courage, imagination, drive and technical grasp —in that order". At points this is very close to the eventual language of the Charter although it is clear from the whole that Jenks was not at that moment thinking in terms of objective Charter language so much as of the high personal and subjective attributes required. It is interesting, however, to note in passing that he puts integrity higher than efficiency or competence. He did not, in any case, leave it at that. Beyond these basic qualities there was a need for several special qualifications, first among them being "a distinctively international outlook". After a passage in which he made it clear that this did *not* mean an emasculated, non-committal, wholly neutralized view of world affairs, Jenks went on to hammer home the point that it was, nevertheless, "no part of the duty of an international official to protect or advance the interests of his country of origin". And therein lies the crux of the loyalty that is or should be demanded by the United Nations of its employees. There is not necessarily a conflict between this and the view attributed in 1960 to a very prominent European statesman that there are neutral countries but there are no neutral men. The Charter of the United Nations certainly leaves no room for conflict or confusion on the point, for Article 100 is unequivocal both with regard to the obligations of the Secretariat as international officials and to the commitment of Member Governments to respect these obligations.

Need for a Career International Service

Before leaving the subject of Mr. Jenks' essay it is worth noting his conclusion that "a staff with such a combination of qualifications can only be secured if its hard core is a permanent international civil service". One can only say that experience of the first quarter century of the United Nations entirely supports this conclusion. There may be doubt today about the optimum "mix" between career staff and "fixed" term appointees—and some would make a case for

recruiting up to 35 or even 40 per cent on short or medium term contracts to attract and keep up-to-date expertise—but no one has seriously argued that the former category is dispensable or that it should not constitute the major part of the Secretariat. Not only continuity is involved, but the custodianship of the ideals of the Charter.

In 1944, the year after Jenks' paper was published, Chatham House published the results of a study of "The International Secretariat of the Future" by a group which included former senior officials of the League like Aghnides and Pelt, who were later also to make important contributions to the work of the United Nations. This study went to the heart of the relationship between efficiency and the width of the geographical base for recruitment, which is implicit in the text of Article 101 of the Charter and a matter of debate every year in the Fifth Committee. The key passage in the 1944 pamphlet reads:

> "The inevitable demands for wide distribution of positions will raise at the outset, for those who are charged with laying the bases of international administration, one real and one apparent dilemma. The apparent dilemma is whether the new secretariat should demand strict international loyalty from its employees or build on national loyalties, reflecting within the administrative unit the *inter*-national nature of the politically responsible body. The real dilemma is closely connected with this: should the efficiency of candidates receive priority over considerations of national distribution in the appointment of personnel?"

The problem this poses is still with us, though it is now far less of a dilemma. The passage of time and the improvement of educational standards all over the world gradually widens the choice of candidates and makes it easier to solve without conflict of interest. All the more reason why Member Governments in their eagerness to achieve what has come to be known as an equitable geographical distribution should be careful not to press for short term action which could disturb the careful balance of Article 101 of the Charter. At all events, the contributors to the Chatham House Symposium were right to uphold the principle that everybody in an international civil service should as far as possible have constructive work to do. We would all do well to recognize that to make appointments purely for the sake of "representation" can result in the creation of sinecures which must inevitably lower the standing and morale of the Secretariat.

Sharing the view that a major permanent or "career" element in the staff of the new international organization would be essential, the experienced group assembled by the Royal Institute of International Affairs nevertheless saw the importance of regular infusions of fresh blood to prevent the development of parochialism or, worse, stagnation masked by ritual internationalism. They clearly envisaged national services as an important source of supply of temporary and perhaps also specialist staff and commented (interestingly, in view of recent developments like the promulgation of United States Public Law 91-175) that such secondment should favourably affect the individual's career and should involve no diminution of his accumulated rights.

For career appointments, the "wise men" looked to a bolder use of entry

examinations than the League had made as a control on standards of recruitment. They of course recognized the problems created by differing academic systems and standards but saw at least two methods of trying to overcome them. One was that for each nationality the examination might be the same as the one used for entry to their own national diplomatic or civil services. The other was that large countries or a number of contiguous countries with similar academic traditions might be considered as distinct examination areas. These ideas are perhaps worth further exploration today.

The Achievement of the Secretariat

So much for the backward look from the vantage point of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations. It is time to look at the Secretariat, as it now is, of the great international Organization to which Jenks and the contributors to the Chatham House Symposium were looking forward while the Second World War was still being bitterly contested. By any reckoning the bureaucracy which now exists to service the massive and intricate machinery for international discussion and co-operation is a most remarkable achievement, the realization and fulfilment of many of the dreams of the early internationalists. And of much that goes beyond their wildest imaginings. The United Nations Secretariat is a body composed of roughly 120 nationalities, very nearly as many as have Member status in the United Nations. It numbers some 10,000 men and women, about half of them at the great Headquarters in New York, but with substantial staffs in Geneva, the old seat of the League, in Vienna, Beirut, Addis Ababa, Bangkok, and Santiago. And there are handfuls even in quite small developing countries. These officials help the nations to conduct their business in five official languages and four working languages, and their expertise extends from the sophisticated fields of outer space and the sea-bed to the imaginative solution of complicated problems of food production and soil erosion at the round earth's imagined corners, from the historical origins of the Middle East conflict to the legal aspects of Trusteeship, from the bush telegraph to satellite communication as a means of disseminating the United Nations message.

If a silver wedding anniversary is a moment for counting blessings, here are some that come into the reckoning for the Secretariat. First, there is the very existence of this substantial body of men and women whose business it is to uphold the high principles of the United Nations Charter, men and women deeply devoted to the search for peaceful solutions to international problems, dedicated to the task of helping, in the name of all the Members, the developing countries of the world, giving the opportunity to have to the have-nots. Secondly, there is the amassing of experience and statistical knowledge about world affairs over the entire spectrum of human activity—unspectacular but invaluable which all this entails. Thirdly, there is the mastery of the formidable problem of organizing, as a daily routine, multinational meetings of changing composition and the surmounting of the linguistic barriers to simultaneous communication between the participants (an administrative achievement that would tax the most

experienced and technically developed among the individual Member Governments). And finally, there is the Secretariat's contribution to the successes in the field of peace-making and peace-keeping, however limited, however unsung, of the greatest experiment in international co-operation the world has ever seen.

The Path to Improvement

But, alas, it is patent that, just as the achievements of the League of Nations in its lifetime and of the United Nations in a quarter of a century are pitifully small against the background of man's highest aspirations for the achievement of one world, the Secretariat falls short of the high standards of efficiency, adaptability and initiative which the world Organization should be able to command. Leaving aside the more delicate sectors of the political work of the United Nations, in any case not the ideal stamping ground for buccaneers or carefree innovators, there is thought by many observers to be too great a degree of conservatism, too great a resistance to change, too great a weight of inertia in the Secretariat's administrative methods. And this inflexibility is a little surprising in an organization which only recently came of age and which should have unrivalled access to an enormous and rich variety of administrative traditions. One commentator (Professor Richard Gardner in an article in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*) has hinted that the fault may lie partly in the high average age of the top echelon in the Secretary-General's team. There may be something in his implied *propter hoc*. But the evidence adduced is no more than circumstantial and it takes no account of the comparative youth of the Secretary-General's top echelon outside New York which consists of three Under-Secretaries-General and four Assistant Secretaries-General with an average age of barely fifty-five. The charge cannot be lightly dismissed, however, especially when rough calculations at the same time suggest that far less than 10 per cent of the Secretariat professionals are under thirty years of age. That is a serious criticism at a time when, more than ever, the best hope for the ideals of the United Nations rests with the young people of all nations. We clearly need to compete more vigorously in the young graduate market and to work more closely with university appointment boards and we must stop using posts at the lower Professional grades as rewarding niches for other categories of employees with long service and good conduct to their credit. For these, deserving as they are, other and more appropriate rewards must be devised. And happily we are progressing towards that goal with plans for a restructuring of our General Service grades.

Another factor in the alleged conservatism may partly be the lack of mobility and interchange of staff, not only between the various members of the United Nations family as a whole, nor only between major units within the United Nations but even between departments at Headquarters. The explanation usually given for this immobility is the degree of specialization required in much of the United Nations work, particularly in the economic and social field. But there are at least five important duty stations apart from New York where these skills are required and within Headquarters there are also several different de-

partments engaged to a greater or lesser degree in work of a political nature. There would thus seem to be considerable scope for more interchange of staff, both in the interests of the work and of the career development and prospects of the staff.

It would be altogether too facile to blame all this on conservatism within the Office of Personnel and the other administrative departments themselves. In this connexion, it is worth noting in passing that there is a very good record of interchange and transferability—including taking a turn at difficult and challenging mission assignments—among the staff of the administrative area. It is, no doubt, true that the preoccupation with staffing an ever-expanding Secretariat and the provision of an administrative nucleus for new enterprises like the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) has given the administrative departments at Headquarters little time for devising more progressive personnel policies—and careful career development for thousands of professional staff is a time-consuming business. It involves among other things a painstaking annual exercise of going through the records of promising staff members, consulting their supervisors and department heads, charting future appointments designed to give them the breadth of experience that will qualify them later for the highest professional jobs in the various duty stations and, finally, identifying the special cases where a short period of study leave would be in the interests of the Organization through the enrichment of a staff member's talent or the replenishment of his specialist skills. But, at the best, career planning can only be done with the support and co-operation of the substantive departments at Headquarters and the major overseas duty stations. It will not be achieved if they insist on keeping each his own ewe lambs in his own fold till they become just another flock of old sheep.

A contributory cause of the trouble may be the appointment and promotion machinery which seems in need of overhaul. Designed to achieve fairness in the selection of candidates and to avoid any suggestion of favouritism or patronage in the award of promotion there are signs that the system of chains of committees and boards connected in series or (to use another metaphor) taking in each other's washing, has become costly in the time of many quite senior officials and may be at the root of some illiberalism in promotion policies. We should now engage in a critical review and overhaul of the system in consultation with responsible staff representatives dedicated to improvement and prepared to accord the Office of Personnel a fairly free hand to carry out its appointed tasks including the planning of career development for individual staff members based on the evaluation of a more meaningful personnel reporting system than now exists.

Where Do We Go From Here?

It has become fashionable to talk of falling morale in the Secretariat with sad wistful shaking of the head as of friends watching the declining health of an old friend. And undoubtedly there are pockets of particular discontent and frustra-

tion. But all this, it seems to me, is a little exaggerated—it grows by what it feeds on. The pessimists and the doubting Thomases should begin to see that change is on the way. An example is the burgeoning of language training—a late conversion and perhaps at present a little exaggerated in its ritual (the incentive system hastily devised during the twenty-third session of the General Assembly will not be easy to administer and could create some inequity in the common system of conditions of service applicable in the United Nations family as a whole): but it is a big step in the direction of better and more flexible use of the human resources available. Attention is now also turning, however belatedly, to other fields of training with the same broad aim. Moreover, the weaknesses in the system of which indications have been given above are all capable of correction, and that mainly within the resources of the Secretariat and the prerogatives of the Secretary-General. There are of course other factors militating against a successful revitalization—among them shortcomings in some of the conditions of service as compared with the rewards available in outside employment. These are matters for debate and decision by the General Assembly. For the most part, however, all we need is the will and, in this year of the twenty-fifth anniversary, the spirit of rededication to the purposes of the United Nations not only by the Member States but by the whole of the Secretariat should ensure that this is not lacking.

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